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Mandel and Sultan: Evidence

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sive dedication . . . most of the objects . . . would not have been saved for future generations—Eskimo and non-Eskimo alike" (p. x.). Throughout the book souvenirs and market art are preponderant; they appeared soon after the earliest voyages of discovery and become very common from the 1870s on. Professor Ray rightly points out that we can understand little of the meaning of traditional arts, for they were already moribund by the time of the first good accounts, but that we can still appreciate them for the goal of perfection and the enjoyment of craftsmanship that the Eskimo creators must have borne in mind.

Market arts, on the other hand, while still demonstrating the Eskimo characteristics of craftsmanship, ingenuity, and humor, are the result of outside demands. The market searches for the twin values that the objects must (1) look "Eskimo" and (2) be handmade by Eskimos. These forces have favored ivory carving over other media, particularly since wood and painting are not automatically deemed "Eskimo." Occasionally this has led to the unfortunate emphasis merely on the "handmade by Eskimos," such as the popularity of Billikens, an introduced form, with little attention given to content and quality. The author sensitively discusses some of the ethical problems of what "handmade," "Eskimo," and other loaded terms mean, and the problems of what the older and younger generations think Eskimo art should be. She forthrightly comes out in favor of artistic quality rather than ethnic purity when discussing contemporary genres. She points out that the "art industry" has long been extremely important to the economy of Eskimo villages, and she estimates that by the 1970s some 1500 or more of about 10,000 adults are active producers and that many of them have chosen their residence on the basis of centers of art production. She concludes the text with a chapter entitled "The Past and the Future," which stresses the inherent limitations of the art market on the Eskimo craftsmen and the relative freedom enjoyed by the new breed of subsidized artists in the burgeoning modern support and training programs. She considers the new arts and artists very important in the emerging redefinitions and sustenance of modern Eskimo ethnicity in contemporary Alaska, with its vast industrial enterprises, higher-education programs, galloping urbanization, and powerful native corporations.

In summary the volume is almost "everything you wanted to know about North Alaskan Eskimo arts and crafts," and it will be sincerely appreciated by collectors and scholars for its comprehensiveness, authoritative data on collections, and bibliography; its glossary; and its useful index. For the reviewer its breadth, sadly, precludes it from having the depth of Professor Ray's *Artists of Tundra and Sea*, and its price precludes a higher quality of photographs and reproduction. In addition to the minor drawbacks mentioned above, one might note that the one small map (p. 4) should be larger and include all of the place names mentioned in the text, and that there should be an explanation of the orthography which appears to stem from a number of lay sources. This is an extremely useful sourcebook that will undoubtedly be treasured for many years by Eskimos and whites alike.

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Evidence. Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan. Santa Cruz, CA: Clatworthy Colorvues, 1977. 72 pp., photographs. \$12.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Drew Moniot
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Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. [Sontag, 1977:5]

Susan Sontag's remarks capture the essence of the photographs contained in *Evidence*. Her words provide a unifying theme which permeates what might otherwise appear to be a random potpourri of images:

- A strange configuration of four human footprints, left in the dirt-covered surface of what might be cement patio flats. A pencil placed parallel to one of the prints in the foreground.
- A sizable pile or bank of rocks, retained by a huge net of wire mesh.

Between these opening and closing images in the book, others depict:

- a space-suited figure apparently executing a push-up on a carpeted office floor.
- nine men with I.D. cards attached to their lapels, standing along the crest of a hill, trying to appear casual for their group portrait.
- a white parachute extending horizontally above the ground, its shrouds attached to the top of a utility pole.
- a 1960-model Thunderbird with flames pouring out from its burning interior.
- a towering column of dust created by an explosion just ahead in the dirt road which stretches on into an expanse of Korean-looking terrain.

According to a release which accompanied a review copy of the book, *Evidence* began as an exhibition of 89 photographs retrieved from the files of government and industry offices and displayed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last spring. The release goes on to say: "The exhibition and book are the results of Mandel and Sultan's intensive three-year investigation of over 2

million photographs from the files of 77 federal, state, and municipal government agencies and large corporations. Financed in part by the National Endowment for the Arts Photographers Fellowship Program, their project's purpose was to demonstrate how the meaning of a photograph is conditioned by the context in which it is seen."

As a point of departure into a discussion of photography, context, and meaning, we might begin with an article published several years ago in *Art Forum*. In this article, entitled "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Alan Sekula suggested that "the meaning of a photograph, like that of any other entity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition." In his investigation of the "photographic discourse," Sekula pointed out:

[although] a photograph is an utterance of some sort, that it carries, or is, a message . . . [it is] . . . an "incomplete" utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined. . . . We are forced, finally, to acknowledge what Barthes calls the "polysemic" character of the photographic image, the existence of a "floating chain of significance, underlying the signifier" (Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image," *Communications*, 4, 1964, p. 44). In other words, the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the possibility of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome. Any given photograph is conceivably open to appropriation by a range of "texts," each new discourse situation generating its own set of messages. [1975:37-38]

Taking Sekula's remarks into consideration, one might imagine the effect of placing the very same image or set of images in the contexts of, say, a newspaper, an art gallery, a book, and so on. Intuitively, one can sense that the shift in context would result in a subsequent shift in the meaning associated with the image or images. They would be regarded differently. They would be approached differently with different sets of criteria, each appropriate to the particular context.

The social-documentary photography of Lewis Hine, as well as the sensational photojournalism of Weegee, for example, succeeded in making a contextual jump from magazines and newspapers to the gallery walls of the Museum of Modern Art. Further, a number of these photographs made still another contextual leap at one time or another upon having been published in various books relating to photography. It should be realized that the very same Hine or Weegee photograph would be perceived quite differently, depending upon whether one encountered it in the periodical, gallery show, or book in which it appeared.

Likewise, in *Evidence*, photographs collected from the files of a government/corporate context were first placed in the gallery context of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and later published in their present context—a book of photographs. Such a seemingly unlikely transposition (less likely, at least, than in the case of either Hine or Weegee) clearly warrants further consideration, both of the conditions which could make such contextual shifts possible and of the implications of these shifts once they have occurred.

To begin with, there is the issue of intent. How is it that

89 photographs, probably never intended to be regarded as art, were nevertheless exhibited in a gallery setting? Although it is true that Hine or Weegee may never have intended his pictures to hang in MOMA, the compassion and intensity injected into their work at the outset at least made possible an eventual elevation of these images to the status of art. How, though, is it possible for images snatched from the impersonal files of government and industry offices also to be regarded as art?

The very "look" of these photographs discloses something of the spirit in which they were created as well as the purpose which they were meant to fulfill—the routine recording and presentation of visual data. Stylistically, the images are rather straightforward and utilitarian in appearance. For the most part, though competently rendered in a technical sense (in terms of exposure, contrast, etc.), the photographs seem to possess a somewhat cold objectivity stemming from the frequent use of on-camera flash illumination and the resulting harsh shadows. In some cases they have an almost snapshot quality owing to the haphazard manner in which the scenes were framed. Here, also, the nature of the content of these shots—with things or situations merely being "shown" and individuals passively presenting themselves to the camera—establishes connections with the snapshot aesthetic. Thus, while the images may not necessarily be stylistically dissimilar to the work of Hine or Weegee, they lack the powerfully affective content which drew public and critical attention and acclaim to these two men. Here, one gets the distinct impression that the photographers were quite satisfied to quickly, simply, and directly document an event or condition. Little, if anything, indicates any aspiration to do more in the way of masterfully utilizing the medium for either the expression of anything resembling social commentary or the creation of anything approaching art.

But of course we know that these images were, nevertheless, exhibited in an art gallery. The tradition which permitted this to occur is known as the principle of "found objects," whereby virtually any object (like Duchamp's urinal) can be discovered, declared to be art, and exhibited in a gallery. The "artist," rather than being the creator of the object, is instead the first person to recognize it as an objet d'art and to so declare it (for a more in-depth discussion, see Ward's *The Criticism of Photography as Art*, 1970:21-23).

This is the key to what the Bay Area artists Mandel and Sultan have done. The photographs which they have discovered, exhibited, and published are "found images." They represent a logical extension of the notion of "found objects." In order to be regarded as art, it was not necessary for the images to have been intended as art nor necessarily to possess any intrinsically artistic qualities. All that was required was their placement or embeddedness in the proper context. This context—the gallery—conferred aesthetic value and importance on them.

So much for the first contextual leap by which Mandel and Sultan transported and transfigured photographs from filing cabinet drawers to gallery walls. The one which followed is equally deserving of attention. Here, 59 of the

89 images were published as the book *Evidence*. This repackaging, however, did not incorporate the familiar photography-book context.

We are accustomed to finding photographs presented in conjunction with some sort of written text—whether a surrounding page of prose, a caption, or at least a title. Indeed, we have been culturally conditioned to experience photographs in this way. Perhaps the magazine or newspaper format provides the best example by illustrating our dependence upon supplementary verbal input when we generate meaning from photographs. Unconsciously, we shift our attention back and forth between image and accompanying text in order to synthesize the total message. The photograph is never really enough. As Sekula was quoted as saying earlier, it “presents merely the possibility of meaning.”

In *Evidence*, though, we are confronted with just such isolated images. Denied the usual supplementary input, we are presented instead with textless, captionless photographs appearing one per page (incidentally, even page numbers have been excluded!). The effect is unsettling. We can barely suppress the urge to find out what the images are about. But as we realize that the information required to satisfy this curiosity has been deliberately withheld, it becomes apparent that what we must deal with are the images themselves. (Although an alphabetical list at the beginning of the book furnishes the names of the agencies and offices which cooperated in the project, we can only guess which image is from which source.) What we are finally presented with, in addition to the photographs, is the task of making sense out of them.

Robert R. Forth, Dean of the California College of Arts and Crafts, suggests how to go about this in a short afterword entitled “The Circumstantial and the Evident.” Forth invites us to play the game of “skip read” when viewing the photographs:

In skip read, one person reads a sentence or paragraph or page of a book, then passes it to the next person who chooses a preferred or random passage at some distance from the first reader's and reads it, then passes the book on to the next person, etc. Sometimes these “leaps over logic” are more elegantly economical and to the point of the book than a faithful reading of all the narrated circumstances in between those passages made evident by the readings. Many times, however, the leaps over presented “logic” create new meanings which began as puzzles.

Without going into detail, it is well to recognize that this endeavor or strategy to generate meaning from the photographs is limited at the outset by the fact that it depends upon the process of psychological projection on the part of the viewer. Consequently, any meaning generated in this way is of the same order as the meaning which is read into such standard projective tests as the Rorschach inkblots or Thematic Apperception Tests. The fact that meaning must be imposed on or attributed to these images has serious implications for their communicative potential. Although it is possible to generate meaning from them, using psychological projection, we should exercise caution in assuming that the process necessarily constitutes visual communication.

In “Symbolic Strategies” (1974), Sol Worth and Larry

Gross suggested that there are two basic strategies which can be utilized to interpret and assign meaning to sign events: attribution and inference. As we have seen, the skip-reading approach represents the first of the two strategies, since meaning is being *attributed* to the images by the viewer (who, in a sense, plays “connect the dots” with randomly selected photographs). As defined by the Worth-Gross model, however, communication is “a social process, within a context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived, and treated as messages from which meaning can be *inferred*” (emphasis added, 1974:30). Within their theoretical framework, then, communicative meaning can be generated only by the interpretive strategy of inference. In such a case, one recognizes that the sign event is purposefully structured or ordered, assumes intent on the part of the creator, and proceeds then to *infer* meaning from the sign event.

Once again, the distinction is that meaning which is attributed or brought to a photographic sign event is not of the same order as meaning which might be inferred from it. By definition, according to the Worth-Gross model, only the latter kind constitutes communication. This, however, is not the sort of meaning which can be generated from *Evidence* using the recommended skip-reading approach.

Before going further, it should be mentioned that the failure of the images in *Evidence* to meet the Worth-Gross criteria of communication is not the major thrust of this review. In all fairness to Mandel and Sultan, it must be remembered that their purpose was only “to demonstrate how the meaning of a photograph is conditioned by the context in which it is seen.” Thus, if one takes “demonstrate” to mean “to show,” “to illustrate,” or “to make evident,” the project could be considered successful. If, on the other hand, one feels that the term connotes some degree of description or explanation, it must be conceded that *Evidence* falls short of the mark, since it lacks any discussion or commentary along these lines, by either Mandel or Sultan. On a positive note, however, the challenge of pursuing the question “Exactly how is the meaning of a photograph conditioned by its context?” can, and should, be taken up by those involved in the study of visual communications. *Evidence* provides the opportunity to apply and test previous relevant theoretical assertions (by Barthes, Sekula, Worth and Gross, and others).

We have seen, for instance, that while these photographs may qualify as art (in the tradition of found objects), they do not constitute communication. By pursuing the question “Why not?” we stand to learn much about the nature of photographic images and how they function.

The first step might be to consider what is the essence of the Worth-Gross model: “. . . meaning is not inherent within the sign itself, but rather in the social context whose conventions and rules dictate the articulatory and interpretive strategies to be invoked by producers and interpreters of symbolic forms” (1974:30). In the case of *Evidence*, it can be seen that no clearly established social context exists to make possible any real consistency or

uniformity in the understanding of these images. Granted that we are invited to embark upon a skip reading of the images, this venture may well result in a sort of narrative which can be invented and superimposed upon them and their ordering. It must be realized, however, that this process is both subjective and arbitrary. This is all that it can be. What is lacking here is an articulation of the shared rules and conventions which would make this succession of images as understandable as the succession of shots in, for example, a theatrical film. Film narrative, with all its structural nuances and complexities such as montage, parallel cutting, flashbacks, and so on, is intelligible only because we are familiar with filmic form and know how to deal with it. The images in *Evidence* are not intelligible in a similar sense because their form and structuring do not obey the rules and conventions of an analogous social context.

Perhaps the overall message, then, to paraphrase and reiterate Jay Ruby's remarks (1976), is the need for the creation of contexts for photographs which would be conducive to the generation of their intended meaning. For if Mandel and Sultan have provided us with anything, they have presented evidence of the "polysemic" nature of photographic images. Such evidence has far-reaching implications, particularly for the communicative capacity of these images.

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The Anthropology of Dance. Anya Peterson Royce. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977. xii + 238 pp., diagrams, illustrations, photographs, bibliography, index. \$15.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Najwa Adra
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In her conclusion to this work, Royce writes that the subfield of anthropology known as the anthropology of dance has grown to the point where it can now boast of a community of scholars, exchanging ideas and building on one another's research. Gone are the days when interested scholars worked in isolation, unaware of the work of others with similar interests (p. 217). This is still a young field, however, where, theoretically, contributions

are made through dispersed articles with a variety of underlying assumptions, aims, and methodologies. The book under review presents a synthesis of research already undertaken and offers suggestions for future work. Because of Royce's training in both anthropology and dance, she deals with both relevant anthropological theory and method and principles of dance analysis. This is the first book published that can be used satisfactorily as a text in an undergraduate course on the anthropology of dance and as a basic reference for those interested in the field.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first introduces the anthropology of dance, the second presents theoretical approaches to the field, and the third discusses future directions for research and includes a one-chapter conclusion.

Royce begins the book with a chapter on the phenomenon of dance, including definitions and problems of definition. She then summarizes the various approaches to dance used by anthropologists. Following this is a description of methods and techniques of dance analysis. This section concludes with a discussion of structure and function in dance. The second section, "Problems and Perspectives," includes chapters on the historical perspective, the comparative method, and symbol and style. The last section includes discussions of the morphology of dance and its potential significance to the anthropological study of dance and the question of the meaning of dance. Three case studies on the history of Colonial dancing, contemporary American Indian pow-wow dancing, and Zapotec dance style are combined with extensive examples from the literature and Royce's own research on Zapotec dancing to provide illustrations for the various theoretical positions discussed.

The strengths of this work are many. Early in the book, Royce insists that dance be analyzed as part of a *dance* event rather than as an isolated phenomenon. She argues that the significance of dance in any group cannot be understood if studied independently of the cultural totality in which it is found (p. 13). Another important issue discussed is the uniqueness of the phenomenon of dance in culture. This quality of dance is not often recognized by researchers. In Royce's words, "Dance may sometimes fill the same functional slot as other culture traits, but . . . it will fill the slot in a different way" (p. 32). Therefore, an adequate understanding of dance in its cultural context must include an appreciation of its unique and "complex" properties (p. 32).

Related to the question of uniqueness is the curious impact of dance. Dance usually engenders strong emotional responses in observers. A common reaction to unfamiliar dance traditions is that they are highly immoral, or at least licentious (p. 158). A good example of this is the similarity of European reactions to West African dances and West African reactions to Euro-American ballroom dancing (p. 158). Royce relates this quality to the use of the human body as the instrument of dance. Arguing that this use results in the dance form's striking immediacy, she holds that it is more difficult to be neutral toward dancing than, for example, toward a painting, which is at least one step removed from the artist (p. 159).